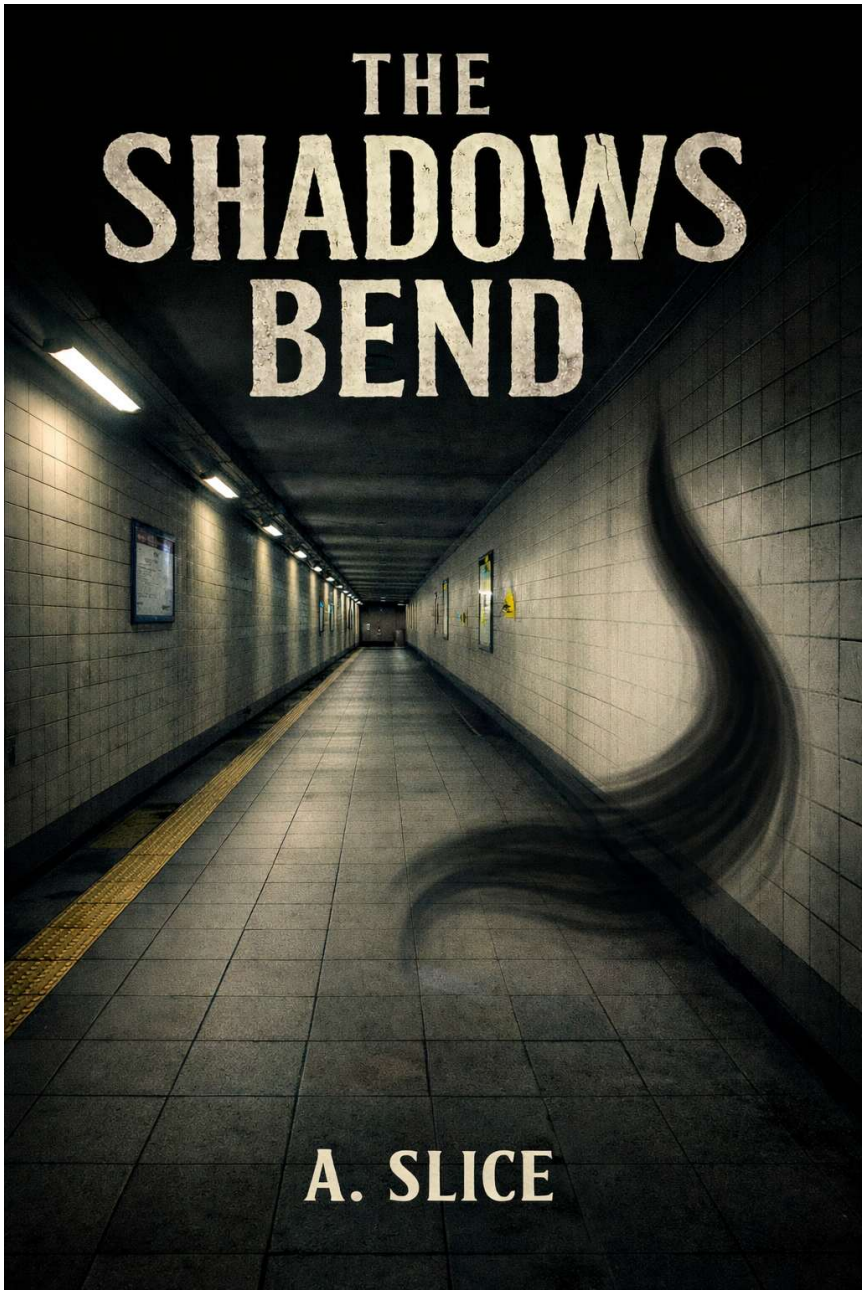
THE
SHADOWS
BEND
A. SLICE

CHAPTER I — Distortion

Carl woke feeling as though he'd surfaced from too deep a place. The room was grey with early light, the edges of his dream already dissolving, leaving only the sense of a corridor and a curve he couldn't quite name. He lay still for a moment, listening to the faint hum in his head that had followed him through the last few weeks of broken sleep. Today was another session with Susan. He wasn't sure what he'd tell her — only that something in him felt misaligned, as if the world had shifted a fraction while he wasn't looking.

He moved through the motions of the morning without really inhabiting them. Shower, kettle, the familiar clatter of the spoon against the mug — all of it felt slightly delayed, as if he were half a second behind himself. The dream kept drifting back in fragments: the corridor, the curve, the sense of being watched by something that wasn't a someone. Each time he tried to focus on the day ahead, the image slid in again, quiet but insistent, like a word he couldn't quite remember but couldn't forget either.

The air outside was cool enough to wake him a little, but not enough to clear the fog behind his eyes. He walked the familiar route toward the centre, letting the rhythm of his steps settle into something automatic. Cars hissed past on damp tarmac, a bus groaned at the lights, and people moved around him with the easy purpose of those who'd slept well. Carl tried to match their pace, but the dream kept nudging at him — the corridor, the curve, that strange sense of being observed by nothing at all. He kept telling himself to let it go, to focus on the day ahead, yet every few minutes the image slid back into place, quiet and persistent, as if it were following him at a distance.

The walkway was almost empty when Carl reached it, just the faint echo of his steps and the low buzz of the ceiling lights filling the long, tiled corridor. He'd walked this route to Susan's office dozens of times, enough that his body moved through it on memory alone. Still, the dream kept tugging at him — that corridor, that curve — and he found himself glancing at the walls as if expecting something familiar to be waiting there.

Halfway along, he slowed. Something in the corner of his vision didn't sit right. A patch of shadow on the right-hand wall seemed to dip inward, bending in a smooth arc that didn't match the straight line of the overhead light. He stopped, frowning, and looked up at the fixture, then back at the wall. The shadow held its shape, curved and quiet, as if the surface beneath it had been gently pulled out of alignment.

Carl blinked hard. When he looked again, the shadow seemed straighter — or maybe he'd imagined the curve entirely. He stood there for a moment longer, waiting for the world to settle into something he recognised. It didn't. Eventually he forced himself to keep walking, the echo of his footsteps sounding slightly off, as though the corridor were a fraction longer than it should have been.

By the time Carl reached the building, the curve in the shadow had settled into the back of his mind like a bruise he couldn't stop pressing. He pushed through the glass doors and let

the warmth of the lobby wash over him, hoping it would steady him. It didn’t. The lift ride felt too slow, the soft hum of the motor too loud, and when the doors opened onto the familiar corridor outside Susan’s office, he realised he’d been holding his breath.

He paused with his hand on the doorframe, trying to gather himself. The walkway, the dream, the curve — they all hovered just out of reach, refusing to form anything he could explain without sounding unwell. He exhaled, straightened his shoulders, and stepped inside.

CHAPTER 2 — The First Session

Susan looked up from her notes with that calm, attentive expression she always wore. “Morning, Carl,” she said. “Rough night?”

He hesitated before answering, unsure where to begin.

Carl sat down opposite her, the familiar softness of the chair doing little to settle the tightness in his chest. He rubbed his palms together once, then let them rest on his knees.

“I’m alright, Sue,” he said.

Susan blinked. “It’s Susan.”

Carl froze for half a second, as though the correction took longer to reach him than it should have. “Right. Sorry. I’m just… tired.”

Susan nodded, giving him space. “The dreams again?”

He hesitated. The walkway pressed at the edge of his thoughts — the curve, the way the shadow had seemed to dip inward, the moment his brain couldn’t make sense of what his eyes were telling him.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “And something else. On the way here.”

Susan leaned forward slightly, attentive but not intrusive. “What happened?”

Carl searched for the right words, aware of how strange they would sound once spoken. “I was walking through the underpass. The one near the offices. And I saw… I don’t know. A shadow, I guess. But it wasn’t right. It looked like it was bending. Curving. Like the wall wasn’t flat.”

He winced at how absurd it sounded.

Susan didn’t flinch. “Bending how?”

Carl shook his head. “I don’t know. It was probably nothing. Just the light. I’m tired. I didn’t sleep well.”

She made a small note, then looked back at him. “When we’re exhausted, our perception can play tricks on us. Shadows especially. They’re easy to misread.”

He nodded, grateful for the explanation even though it didn’t sit comfortably. The image of the curve lingered anyway, quiet and persistent, as if it hadn’t finished with him yet.

Susan let the silence settle for a moment, giving him room to continue if he wanted to. When he didn't, she folded her hands loosely in her lap.

"Carl," she said gently, "you've mentioned feeling out of sync lately. The dreams, the tiredness, the sense of things being… off. Sometimes when we're under that kind of strain, our brains try to make patterns out of shadows or reflections. It's not unusual."

He nodded, though the explanation didn't quite land. "I know. I just—" He stopped, searching for the right shape of the thought. "It didn't feel like a trick of the light. It felt… deliberate. Like the wall wasn't straight."

Susan's expression softened, but her voice stayed steady. "And how did that make you feel?"

Carl let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. "Uneasy, I guess. Not scared. Just… wrong-footed. Like I'd missed a step."

She made another small note. "You've been running on very little sleep. That can distort perception in subtle ways. It doesn't mean anything is actually wrong with the environment."

He looked down at his hands. "Yeah. Maybe."

But the curve lingered in his mind — not dramatic, not monstrous, just quietly impossible. A small, precise wrongness that refused to flatten into something ordinary.

Susan closed her notebook. "Let's keep an eye on it. If it happens again, or if the dreams intensify, we can explore it further. For now, I think the best thing you can do is focus on rest. Your mind is telling you it's exhausted."

Carl nodded again, grateful for her calm even as something in him resisted the simplicity of her explanation. He didn't argue. He never did. But as he stood to leave, he felt the faintest pull in his chest — the sense that whatever he'd seen in the walkway wasn't finished with him.

Carl stepped back into the corridor, the soft click of Susan's door closing behind him sounding sharper than usual. The building felt too still, as if the air had thickened in the short time he'd been inside. He walked toward the lift, trying to shake the lingering unease, but the session had left him with more questions than clarity. Susan's explanations were reasonable — they always were — yet they slid off the surface of his mind without settling anywhere solid.

In the lift's mirrored panel, he caught his own reflection and paused. He looked tired, yes, but there was something else in his expression he didn't recognise. A kind of

watchfulness, as though he were waiting for something he couldn’t name. He blinked, and the moment passed.

Outside, the afternoon light felt flatter than it should have been. People moved around him with their usual purpose, but he couldn’t quite match their rhythm. Every sound — footsteps, distant traffic, the rustle of a coat — seemed a fraction out of place, as if the world had been nudged slightly off its axis while he wasn’t looking.

He told himself it was just exhaustion. Just the dream. Just the shadow he’d misread. But as he walked back toward the underpass, he found himself slowing, eyes drawn to the tiled walls ahead, searching for the curve he hoped — and feared — he’d imagined.

Carl hesitated at the mouth of the walkway, letting a couple of people pass before he stepped inside. The corridor looked the same as it always had — tiled walls, fluorescent lights, the faint echo of footsteps bouncing ahead of him — but something in the air felt different. Thinner, maybe. Or stretched.

He walked slowly, eyes flicking to the right-hand wall where he’d seen the curve earlier. The shadow wasn’t there now. Just the flat wash of light, the straight line of the tiles, the ordinary geometry of a place he’d crossed a hundred times. He told himself he should feel relieved.

But he didn’t.

Halfway through, he paused again. Not because he saw anything — but because he felt something. A tiny shift, like the corridor had lengthened by a step or two, or like the air pressure had dipped without warning. He turned slightly, checking behind him, then ahead. Nothing had changed. And yet the sense of misalignment clung to him, quiet and insistent.

He kept walking, faster now, as though the act of moving might shake the feeling loose. By the time he reached the far end, his pulse had picked up, though he couldn’t have said why. He stepped out into the open air and exhaled, realising only then that he’d been holding his breath again.

It was nothing. Just tiredness. Just the dream. Just shadows and stress and a mind stretched thin.

That’s what he told himself.

But the unease followed him home like a faint echo, refusing to fade.

Carl walked the rest of the way home with the same faint pressure behind his eyes that had been there all morning. By the time he reached his flat, the sky had dulled into a washed-out grey, the kind that made the world feel flatter than it should. He dropped his keys in the bowl by the door and stood there for a moment, listening to the quiet.

CHAPTER 3 — The Flat at Night

Usually the silence helped him unwind. Today it felt like the air was holding its breath.

He made dinner without appetite, moving through the motions the same way he had that morning — chopping, stirring, waiting — but his mind kept drifting back to the walkway. Not the shadow itself, but the moment after, when the corridor had felt a fraction too long. He tried to replay it logically, to convince himself he'd misjudged the distance, but the memory wouldn't sit neatly. It kept shifting, like a picture that refused to stay in focus.

He ate in front of the muted television, barely tasting anything. Every so often he caught himself glancing toward the hallway, as though expecting to see something there. He told himself it was just nerves. Just tiredness. Just the residue of a strange day.

But when he finally switched off the lights and headed to bed, the flat felt subtly misaligned — as if the walls weren't quite where he remembered them being.

He paused in the doorway of his bedroom, a faint prickle running along the back of his neck. Nothing was wrong. Everything looked exactly as it always had.

And yet, as he lay down and closed his eyes, the dream returned in fragments: the corridor, the curve, the sense of being watched by something that had no shape at all.

Sleep took him slowly, and not kindly.

CHAPTER 4 — Dream One

Carl drifted into sleep the way a stone sinks into deep water — slowly at first, then all at once. The darkness felt thick, almost textured, and for a moment he thought he was simply floating in it. Then the corridor emerged around him, not built so much as revealed, its walls stretching out in both directions with the soft, impossible glow of a place that didn't need a source of light.

He recognised it immediately. Not from memory, but from the feeling it carried — the same quiet pressure he'd felt in the walkway, the same sense of being observed by something that had no eyes.

He took a step forward. The sound didn't echo. The corridor swallowed it.

Ahead, the walls seemed straight at first, then not. A gentle curve appeared, subtle as a breath, bending inward as though the space itself were being pulled by an unseen hand. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't threatening. It was simply wrong — a small, precise deviation from the geometry his mind expected.

He tried to focus on it, but the curve shifted when he looked directly at it, smoothing into a straight line, then bending again at the edge of his vision. The more he tried to fix it in place, the more it slipped away, like a thought he couldn't quite hold.

A faint hum rose in the air — not mechanical, not electrical, but something deeper, like the vibration of a string pulled tight. It resonated in his chest, in his teeth, in the back of his skull.

Carl turned, suddenly aware that the corridor behind him had changed. It was longer now. Or shorter. Or simply different. The walls felt closer, the air thicker, as though the space were adjusting itself around him.

He tried to move, but his legs felt heavy, as if the floor were holding him in place. The hum deepened. The curve on the wall pulsed once, like a heartbeat.

Then the corridor folded — not violently, not with force, but with a quiet, deliberate shift, as though reality were being corrected.

Carl gasped and woke with a jolt, heart hammering, the room around him too still, too silent, too perfectly aligned.

For a moment he wasn't sure which version of the corridor he'd left behind.

CHAPTER 5 — The Second Day

Carl woke with a sharp intake of breath, the remnants of the dream clinging to him like static. For a moment he lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling, waiting for his heartbeat to settle. The room was quiet, the early light soft against the curtains, but something in the air felt… displaced. As though the space had been rearranged while he slept.

He sat up slowly. His bedroom looked exactly as it always had — the wardrobe, the chair with yesterday's clothes draped over it, the faint outline of the hallway beyond the open door — yet he couldn't shake the sense that the angles were wrong. Not visibly. Not in any way he could point to. Just a subtle misalignment, like a picture frame that had been nudged a fraction of an inch.

He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear the fog. The dream hovered at the edge of his thoughts: the corridor, the curve, the hum that had vibrated through his bones. He tried to recall more, but the details slipped away, leaving only the feeling of being watched by something that didn't need eyes.

When he finally stood, the floor felt slightly uneven beneath his feet — not enough to trip him, just enough to make him pause. He waited for the sensation to pass. It didn't. Not entirely.

In the bathroom mirror, he looked pale, drawn. The same tiredness as before, but layered now with something else. A tension he couldn't name.

He splashed water on his face, gripping the sink until the porcelain felt solid under his hands. "Just a dream," he muttered. "Just exhaustion."

But as he stepped back into the hallway, he hesitated. The corridor seemed a touch longer than he remembered. Only by a step. Maybe less. But enough that he noticed.

Enough that he couldn't ignore it.

Carl moved through the flat with the slow caution of someone trying not to disturb something fragile. The sense of misalignment from the night before hadn't faded; if anything, it had settled into the space, quiet and patient. He made coffee, the familiar click of the kettle oddly sharp in the stillness, and tried to focus on the day ahead.

But the dream kept brushing against the edges of his thoughts — the corridor, the curve, the hum that had vibrated through him. Each time he tried to pin it down, it slipped away, leaving only the echo of being watched by something that didn't need to stand anywhere to be present.

He stepped into the hallway and paused again. It looked normal. Perfectly normal. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that the distance from his bedroom to the front door had

changed by a step. Maybe less. Maybe nothing at all. He stood there longer than he meant to, waiting for the sensation to pass.

It didn’t.

Outside, the morning light felt thin, as though the world were lit from a slightly different angle. He walked toward the centre, trying to settle into the rhythm of the day, but every sound — footsteps, passing cars, the distant rumble of a lorry — seemed a fraction out of sync, as if the world were running on a slightly different tempo than he was.

He told himself it was just the dream. Just exhaustion. Just the residue of a strange night.

But as he approached the walkway again, a tightness formed in his chest. Not fear. Not anticipation. Something quieter. A sense of returning to a place that had already begun to change him.

He slowed at the entrance, the tiled corridor stretching ahead in its familiar straight line.

Except today, it didn’t feel straight.

Not visibly. Not in any way he could point to.

Just in the way a room feels when someone has moved a chair half an inch to the left.

Carl stepped into the walkway with the same cautious pace he’d used the day before, as though the corridor itself might react to him. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, steady and familiar, but the sound felt slightly out of tune — a half-step higher than he remembered. He tried to ignore it, focusing instead on the straight line of tiles stretching ahead.

For a few metres, everything seemed normal.

Then he felt it.

Not a sight. Not a sound. A shift.

A tiny, almost imperceptible tug in the air, as if the space around him had inhaled. He slowed, eyes drawn to the right-hand wall. At first he saw nothing unusual. Just the flat wash of light, the clean line of the tiles.

Then, at the edge of his vision, the shadow dipped.

A soft, shallow curve. The same impossible bend as before.

He turned his head sharply — and the curve straightened, snapping back into the geometry the world was supposed to have. He blinked, stepped closer, leaned in slightly. The wall was flat. Perfectly flat.

But when he stepped back, letting the shadow fall into the corner of his eye again, the curve returned. Quiet. Precise. Patient.

His breath caught.

This wasn't tiredness. This wasn't a trick of the light. This was the same wrongness he'd seen yesterday — repeating itself with the calm certainty of something that didn't need to rush.

He stood there for a long moment, heart thudding in his chest, trying to decide whether to look directly at it again. Part of him wanted to. Part of him didn't.

In the end, he forced himself to keep walking, the echo of his footsteps sounding slightly delayed, as though the corridor were responding a fraction of a second too late.

By the time he reached the far end, his hands were trembling.

He didn't look back.

Carl didn't breathe properly until he was out of the walkway and back in the open air. Even then, the relief felt thin, like a surface layer that didn't reach his chest. He kept walking, trying to settle into the rhythm of the street, but the world felt slightly out of phase — as though he were moving through it a fraction of a second behind everyone else.

He told himself to focus. To ground himself. To think logically.

But the curve wouldn't leave him.

Not the sight of it — that had been fleeting — but the certainty of it. The way it had appeared only at the edge of his vision, the way it had straightened when he looked directly at it, the way the air had seemed to shift around him just before it appeared. It wasn't a trick of the light. He knew that now with a clarity that made his stomach tighten.

He reached a crossing and stopped, waiting for the signal to change. People moved around him, purposeful and unbothered, their footsteps crisp against the pavement. He tried to match their pace, their ease, but his mind kept circling the same thought:

If it happened twice, it wasn't random.

He swallowed hard. He could tell Susan. He should tell Susan. But the memory of her calm, reasonable explanations from yesterday made something in him recoil. She'd think it

was stress. Exhaustion. Misperception. She'd write it down in her notebook and reassure him that shadows bend all the time.

But shadows didn't bend like that.

The signal changed. Carl crossed, hands shoved deep in his pockets, shoulders tight. He didn't want to go back to the flat. He didn't want to be alone with the memory of the curve. But he didn't know where else to go.

As he walked, he became aware of a faint pressure behind his eyes — the same subtle hum he'd felt in the dream, the same vibration that had pulsed through the corridor. It wasn't painful. Just present. Like a reminder.

Or a warning.

He blinked hard, trying to clear it, but the sensation lingered, quiet and patient.

By the time he reached his street, he knew one thing with absolute certainty:

Whatever was happening wasn't finished with him.

CHAPTER 6 — The Flat Bends

By the time Carl reached his flat, the tightness in his chest hadn't eased. He unlocked the door with a kind of mechanical precision, as though focusing on the small, familiar motions might anchor him. The moment he stepped inside, the air felt different — not colder, not heavier, just… arranged in a way he couldn't quite name.

He stood in the hallway for a few seconds, listening. The flat was silent, but the silence felt layered, as if there were a second, quieter stillness beneath the first. He tried to shake it off, hanging his coat on the hook, but even that small action felt slightly misaligned, like the hook was a fraction higher than it had been yesterday.

He moved into the living room. Everything looked exactly as he'd left it — the sofa, the books on the coffee table, the faint line of sunlight across the floor — yet he couldn't shake the sense that the room had shifted by a degree or two. Not visibly. Not in any way he could point to. Just in the way the space felt around him.

He sat down, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. His pulse was still elevated, a steady thrum in his ears. He tried to replay the moment in the walkway, to convince himself he'd misread the shadow again, but the memory was too clear. The curve had been there. It had returned. It had behaved the same way — visible only at the edge of his vision, straightening when he looked directly at it.

That consistency frightened him more than the distortion itself.

He rubbed his face with both hands. He could call Susan. He could tell her everything. But the thought of her calm, clinical explanations made something in him recoil. She'd tell him it was stress. Sleep deprivation. A perceptual glitch. And maybe she'd be right.

But the curve hadn't felt like a glitch.

It had felt intentional.

He stood abruptly, needing to move, needing to do something. He walked to the kitchen, then back to the living room, then to the hallway again. Each time he passed through a doorway, he felt a faint, almost imperceptible shift — as though the angles were adjusting around him, smoothing themselves into a shape he didn't recognise.

He stopped in the centre of the flat, breath shallow.

For the first time, he wondered if the distortion was following him.

Not the walkway.

Not the shadow.

Him.

The thought settled into his chest with a quiet, undeniable weight.

Carl tried to distract himself — tidying the kitchen, wiping down the counter, rearranging a stack of unopened post — but every movement felt slightly off, as though his body were working against a rhythm the room no longer shared. The flat was silent, but the silence had a texture now, a faint pressure beneath it, like the air was holding a shape he couldn't see.

He walked into the hallway again, intending to fetch his phone from the bedroom, and stopped dead.

Something was wrong.

Not visibly. Not obviously. But the moment he stepped over the threshold, the space felt… stretched. As if the distance between the bedroom door and the living room had lengthened by a fraction of a step. He stood perfectly still, heart thudding, trying to convince himself he was imagining it.

He took one slow step forward.

The sensation deepened — a subtle pull, like the air ahead of him had thickened by a degree. He looked at the walls. Straight. Flat. Ordinary. But the feeling persisted, quiet and insistent, as though the geometry of the hallway had shifted by a margin too small for the eye but not too small for the body.

He swallowed hard.

"Stop it," he whispered to himself. "You're tired. That's all."

But when he turned to go back toward the living room, he froze.

At the edge of his vision — just at the corner, where the wall met the ceiling — a shadow dipped.

A soft, shallow curve.

The same impossible bend he'd seen in the walkway.

He snapped his head toward it, breath catching.

The curve straightened instantly, flattening into the clean line of the ceiling.

Carl stared, unblinking, waiting for it to return. It didn’t. The wall was perfectly normal. Perfectly straight. Perfectly harmless.

But the echo of the curve lingered in his mind, pulsing with the same quiet certainty as before.

This wasn’t the walkway.

This wasn’t a trick of the light.

This was his home.

He backed away slowly, pulse hammering, until he reached the living room again. He didn’t sit. He didn’t move. He just stood there, breathing shallowly, the truth settling into him with a cold, deliberate weight.

It wasn’t the corridor that was bending.

It was the world around him.

Or him within it.

CHAPTER 7 — The Reflection

Carl stayed in the centre of the living room for a long time, barely breathing. The flat felt too still, as if the air were waiting for him to move. He tried to tell himself he'd imagined the curve — that it was just the echo of the walkway, the residue of a bad night's sleep — but the lie wouldn't settle. His body knew better. His body had reacted before his mind had time to rationalise.

He was afraid.

Not panicked. Not frantic. Just quietly, deeply afraid in a way that felt unfamiliar. It wasn't the fear of danger. It wasn't even the fear of losing control. It was the fear of being noticed by something he couldn't see.

He moved slowly to the sofa and sat down, hands clasped tightly together. The room looked normal. Perfectly normal. But the normality felt staged, as though the flat were holding its shape for his benefit. He kept glancing toward the hallway, half expecting the curve to return, half terrified that it would.

His phone buzzed on the coffee table — a calendar reminder he'd forgotten about. The sound made him flinch. He stared at the screen for a moment, then turned it face-down without checking it.

He didn't want to talk to anyone.
He didn't want to explain this.
He didn't want to hear himself say the words out loud.

A faint hum rose in his ears — the same low vibration from the dream, the same resonance he'd felt in the walkway. It wasn't loud. It wasn't even unpleasant. It was just… present. Like a tuning fork held against the inside of his skull.

He closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing.

The hum deepened for a moment, then faded.

When he opened his eyes again, the hallway looked exactly the same.

But he didn't trust it.

For the first time, he understood that whatever was happening wasn't random. It wasn't a trick of the light. It wasn't stress or exhaustion or misperception.

It was intentional.

And it was getting closer.

CHAPTER 8 — The Realisation

Carl stayed on the sofa until the trembling in his hands eased, though the unease never fully left his chest. Eventually he forced himself to stand, telling himself he needed to move, to do something ordinary. Anything ordinary.

He made tea.
He opened the curtains.
He checked the time.

Each action felt slightly delayed, as though the world were responding a fraction of a second after he did. The kettle's click sounded too sharp. The curtain rail felt a touch higher than it should have been. The clock on the wall seemed to tick with a rhythm that didn't quite match the pulse in his ears.

He tried to ignore it.

He sat at the table with his mug, staring at the steam rising from it. The flat was quiet again — too quiet — but he forced himself to breathe slowly, grounding himself in the warmth of the cup, the familiar weight of it in his hands.

For a moment, it almost worked.

Then he noticed the corner.

The far corner of the living room, where the wall met the ceiling. Nothing was wrong with it. Nothing was moving. Nothing was bending. But his eyes kept drifting toward it, as though something there was waiting for him to look away.

He stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. The sound made him flinch.

He walked to the window, needing distance from the corner, from the hallway, from the memory of the curve. Outside, the street looked normal — people walking, cars passing, the world carrying on without hesitation. He pressed his palm to the glass, grounding himself in the cold.

For a moment, he felt almost steady.

Then, in the reflection, he saw it.

Not a shape.
Not a figure.
Just a dip.

A soft, shallow curve in the reflected ceiling line behind him.

He spun around.

The ceiling was straight. Perfectly straight.

His breath caught in his throat.

The reflection had shown the curve.
The room itself had not.

He backed away from the window, pulse hammering, the mug of tea forgotten on the table. The flat felt smaller now, as though the walls had drawn in by a fraction of an inch.

He didn’t know what frightened him more — the distortion itself, or the fact that it had chosen the one place he should have felt safe.

Sleep took Carl in fragments — a drift, a drop, a slow sinking into something that didn’t feel like rest. The darkness around him wasn’t empty this time. It had a structure, a faint grain, like the surface of something vast pressed close to his skin.

Then the flat emerged.

Not as it was, but as a version of itself.

The hallway appeared first, stretching out in a way that felt both familiar and wrong. The walls were the same colour, the same texture, but the proportions were off by degrees too small to measure. The ceiling felt a little higher. The floor a little narrower. The angles a little too sharp, as though the space had been rebuilt from memory by something that didn’t quite understand human geometry.

Carl took a step forward.
The sound didn’t echo.
It dissolved.

He moved into the living room. The furniture was there — the sofa, the table, the window — but each object felt like a placeholder, a suggestion of itself. The sofa had the right shape but no weight. The table cast a shadow that didn’t match its legs. The window showed nothing at all, just a soft, depthless grey.

He turned slowly, heart thudding.

The corner.

The same corner he’d been watching earlier.
The one that had felt wrong.

Here, in the dream, it wasn’t a corner at all.

It was a curve.

A soft, deliberate bend where the wall should have met the ceiling. Not dramatic. Not grotesque. Just quietly impossible — a correction, as though the dream were showing him the true shape of the space.

He stared at it, unable to look away.

The curve pulsed once, like a breath.

A faint hum rose in the air — the same vibration from the corridor, from the previous dream, from the moment the distortion first appeared. It resonated through the room, through him, through the space between his thoughts.

Then the flat folded.

Not violently.
Not with force.
Just a gentle, inevitable shift, as though the geometry were adjusting itself around him.

Carl tried to step back, but the floor moved with him, sliding under his feet like a conveyor belt. The walls stretched. The ceiling dipped. The curve widened, opening into a shape he couldn’t comprehend.

Something was watching him.

Not from a place.
Not from a direction.
Just present.

The hum deepened.

The curve brightened at its edges, as though lit from within.

Then the entire room bent inward — a soft, quiet collapse of angles — and Carl fell through the space where the corner should have been.

He woke with a strangled gasp, sitting bolt upright in bed, the darkness of the real room feeling too still, too perfect, too carefully arranged.

For a long moment, he didn’t move.

Because he wasn’t entirely sure the room had finished settling.

Carl woke with a sharp, involuntary gasp, the kind that felt dragged out of him rather than chosen. For a moment he didn’t move. The darkness of the room felt too still, too perfectly arranged, as though it had been waiting for him to return.

His heartbeat thudded in his ears, loud enough that it seemed to fill the space around him. He sat up slowly, the sheets clinging to his skin with a faint static that made him shiver.

The dream clung to him in fragments — the hallway, the flat, the curve widening into something that wasn’t a corner at all. But what unsettled him most wasn’t the imagery. It was the accuracy. The dream hadn’t felt symbolic or distorted. It had felt observational. As though something had been studying his home and reconstructing it with its own logic.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and paused.

The floor felt level.
But his body didn’t trust it.

He stood carefully, testing the weight of each step. The room looked normal — the wardrobe, the chair, the faint outline of the hallway beyond the door — but the normality felt brittle, like a surface tension that might break if he breathed too deeply.

He walked to the doorway.

Stopped.

The hallway looked exactly as it should.
But the dream’s version of it hovered in his mind — stretched, sharpened, corrected.

He took a step forward.

Nothing moved.
Nothing bent.
Nothing shifted.

But the air felt aware of him.

He pressed a hand to the wall, grounding himself in the cool solidity of the plaster. It felt real. It felt stable. But the memory of the dream’s curve pulsed behind his eyes, a quiet reminder that the wall had not always been straight.

He closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing.

The hum from the dream — that low, resonant vibration — flickered at the edge of his hearing. Not loud. Not constant. Just a faint echo, like a tuning fork still settling after being struck.

He opened his eyes again.

The hallway was unchanged.

But he wasn’t.

For the first time, he understood that the dream hadn’t been a place he visited.

It had been a place that visited him.

And it had brought something back.

Carl stood in the hallway, the memory of the dream still clinging to him like a film on his skin. The flat was quiet, too quiet, as though the silence had been arranged with intention. He stared at the walls, the ceiling, the familiar angles of the space he’d lived in for years.

He didn’t trust any of it.

He lifted his hand and placed it against the wall. The plaster felt cool, solid, ordinary. He pressed harder, half-expecting it to ripple beneath his palm the way it had in the dream. It didn’t. But the air around him felt charged, as though the room were holding its breath.

He stepped back.

Measured the distance between the bedroom door and the living room with his eyes.

Then he walked it.

One step.
Two.
Three.
Four.

He stopped.

It felt wrong.

Not longer. Not shorter. Just… shifted, as though the space had been recalculated overnight. He walked it again, slower this time, counting under his breath. The number of steps didn’t change, but the sensation did — a faint resistance, like walking through a room that wasn’t entirely convinced it wanted to stay the same shape.

He turned toward the corner.

The same corner from the dream.
The same corner that had curved.

He stared at it, refusing to blink.

Nothing happened.

The wall remained straight. The ceiling met it at a perfect right angle. The corner was just a corner.

But the longer he looked, the more he felt the air tighten around him — a subtle pressure, like the room was aware of his attention.

He took a slow step closer.

The pressure deepened.

Another step.

A faint hum flickered at the edge of his hearing — the same low vibration from the dream, the same resonance from the walkway. It wasn't loud. It wasn't constant. It was just… present. A quiet acknowledgement.

He reached the corner and lifted his hand.

His fingers hovered a few centimetres from the wall.

The hum deepened by a fraction.

Carl froze.

He hadn't touched the wall.
He hadn't moved.
He hadn't breathed.

But the room had responded.

He pulled his hand back slowly, heart pounding.

The hum faded.

The pressure eased.

The corner remained perfectly straight.

Carl stepped away, trembling, the truth settling into him with a cold, precise clarity:

The distortion wasn't random.
It wasn't passive.
It wasn't a glitch.

It was waiting.

And it had just answered him.

Carl moved through the flat with the careful, deliberate steps of someone trying not to disturb something fragile. The air felt different now — not tense, not heavy, just aware. As though the space had registered his testing of the geometry and was waiting to see what he would do next.

He walked into the kitchen, trying to anchor himself in routine. He filled the kettle. He reached for a mug. He opened the cupboard.

And froze.

The mug wasn't where it should have been.

Not missing.
Not moved far.
Just… shifted.

A few centimetres to the left.
Barely anything.
But enough that his hand closed on empty air.

He stared at the shelf, heart thudding. The mug sat there, perfectly ordinary, perfectly still, as though it had always been in that position. But Carl knew — with the same quiet certainty he'd felt in the walkway — that it hadn't been there yesterday.

He reached for it slowly, fingers trembling.

The moment he touched it, a faint vibration ran through the cupboard shelf. Not a sound. Not a movement. Just a subtle resonance, like the hum from the dream had found a new surface to inhabit.

Carl snatched his hand back.

The vibration stopped instantly.

He stepped away from the cupboard, breath shallow, eyes scanning the room. Nothing else looked out of place. Nothing else had moved. But the mug's new position pulsed in his mind, a tiny, precise deviation that felt deliberate.

He backed into the hallway.

Stopped.

The hallway felt shorter.

Not visibly.
Not measurably.
Just in the way his body registered the space — a subtle compression, as though the walls had drawn in by a fraction of an inch.

He took a step forward.

The air tightened around him.

Another step.

A faint hum flickered at the edge of his hearing — the same resonance from the dream, the walkway, the corner. It wasn't loud. It wasn't constant. It was just… present. A quiet acknowledgement.

He turned toward the living room.

And saw it.

At the edge of his vision — just at the corner where the wall met the ceiling — the shadow dipped.

A soft, shallow curve.

The same impossible bend.

He didn't look directly at it.
He didn't dare.

He stood perfectly still, pulse hammering, the truth settling into him with a cold, precise clarity:

The distortion wasn't appearing randomly.

It wasn’t tied to a place.
It wasn’t waiting for night or dreams.

It was following his attention.

And now it knew he was watching.

Carl stood in the hallway with his coat half on, one arm through the sleeve, the other hanging loose. He’d been frozen like that for nearly a minute, staring at the front door as though it were a threshold into something he wasn’t sure he wanted to face.

He needed to get out.
He needed air.
He needed distance from the mug, the corner, the hum.

But the flat felt different now — not hostile, not dangerous, just… attentive. As though the space were waiting to see what he would do next.

He forced his arm through the second sleeve and stepped toward the door.

The air tightened.

Not dramatically.
Not enough to stop him.
Just enough that he felt it — a faint resistance, like walking into a room where someone had just been talking about him.

He reached for the handle.

His fingers hovered a moment too long.

The hum flickered at the edge of his hearing — soft, low, almost curious.

Carl swallowed hard and gripped the handle.

The hum deepened by a fraction.

He froze.

It wasn’t loud.
It wasn’t threatening.
It was simply responsive.

He turned the handle slowly. The latch clicked with its usual sound, but the click felt sharper, as though the acoustics of the hallway had shifted by a degree. He pulled the door open.

The corridor outside looked normal — the same carpet, the same banister, the same faint smell of cleaning fluid. But stepping into it felt like stepping out of a pressurised cabin. His ears popped faintly, and the hum vanished instantly, leaving a silence that felt almost too clean.

He stepped out and closed the door behind him.

The moment the latch clicked shut, he felt the shift.

A subtle recalibration.
A quiet adjustment.
As though the flat had exhaled.

Carl stood perfectly still, staring at the door, heart thudding. He didn't know what he expected — a sound, a movement, a shadow bending at the edge of his vision — but nothing happened.

The corridor remained ordinary.

The world remained ordinary.

But Carl didn't feel ordinary.

He took a step toward the stairs.

The air felt normal.

Another step.

Still normal.

He exhaled shakily, relief washing through him in a thin, fragile wave.

Then, just as he reached the top of the stairs, something shifted at the edge of his vision.

Not in the flat.
Not behind him.
Ahead.

A shadow on the stairwell wall dipped — a soft, shallow curve, barely there, gone the moment he turned his head.

Carl’s breath caught.

It had followed him.

Not the flat.
Not the dream.
Not the corner.

The distortion.

It had come with him into the world.

Carl sat in the waiting room with his hands clasped so tightly his knuckles were white. The room felt too bright, too open, as though the light itself were pushing against his skin. He kept glancing at the corners — the ceiling, the skirting boards, the edges of the furniture — searching for any sign of a curve.

Nothing moved.
Nothing bent.
Nothing shifted.

But he didn’t trust the stillness.

“Carl?” Susan’s voice was warm, steady, familiar. He stood too quickly, nearly knocking his knee against the coffee table. She noticed — of course she noticed — but she didn’t comment. She simply stepped aside and gestured him into her office.

He walked in slowly, scanning the room. The angles were clean. The light was soft. The space felt stable in a way his flat no longer did. He exhaled, a thin, shaky breath.

Susan closed the door and sat opposite him, notebook resting on her knee.

“You look tired,” she said gently.

Carl let out a humourless laugh. “I didn’t sleep well.”

“Nightmares?”

He hesitated. “Something like that.”

Susan waited. She was good at waiting — too good. The silence stretched just long enough for him to feel the pressure of it.

“I’ve been seeing things,” he said finally.

Her expression didn’t change. “What kind of things?”

He swallowed. His mouth felt dry. “Shadows. Corners. They’re… wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

He stared at the carpet, unable to meet her eyes. “They bend.”

Susan nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “Optical distortions can happen when we’re under stress. Especially when we’re tired.”

Carl’s jaw tightened. He’d expected that answer, but hearing it made something inside him twist.

“It’s not stress,” he said quietly.

“Then what do you think it is?”

He looked up at her. Her face was calm, open, professional. She believed she was helping him. She believed she understood.

But she didn’t.

“It’s happening in my flat,” he said. “In the walkway. In my dreams. It’s the same shape every time. The same curve. It’s… consistent.”

Susan’s pen paused above the page.

“Consistent how?”

Carl shook his head. “I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like the world is… adjusting. Like it’s correcting itself around me.”

Susan leaned forward slightly. “Carl, when you say ‘the world, ’do you mean your perception of it? Or the world itself?”

He hesitated.

And in that hesitation, the distance between them widened.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

Susan softened her voice. “You’ve been under a lot of pressure. Sleep deprivation can cause—”

“It’s not sleep,” he snapped, then immediately regretted the sharpness. He rubbed his face with both hands. “I’m sorry. I just… I know what I saw.”

Susan watched him carefully. Not suspiciously. Not judgmentally. Just with the quiet, clinical attention of someone trying to map symptoms onto a framework.

“Carl,” she said gently, “have you considered that these experiences might be your mind’s way of signalling overwhelm?”

He stared at her.

For a moment, he felt utterly alone.

Because the distortion wasn’t overwhelming him.

It was watching him.

And Susan couldn’t see it.

Susan was still watching him with that calm, clinical attentiveness when it happened.

Carl felt it before he saw it — a faint tightening in the air, a subtle pressure behind his eyes, the same quiet shift he’d felt in the flat and the walkway. His breath caught. His gaze drifted, unbidden, to the corner of the room behind Susan’s chair.

The corner was straight.

Then it wasn’t.

At the very edge of his vision, the shadow dipped — a soft, shallow curve, impossibly gentle, impossibly precise. The same curve from the walkway. The same curve from the flat. The same curve from the dream.

Carl’s pulse spiked.

He blinked hard, forcing himself to look directly at it.

The curve snapped flat instantly, the wall meeting the ceiling at a perfect right angle.

Susan didn’t react.
She didn’t turn.
She didn’t notice anything at all.

“Carl?” she said softly. “You went very still just then.”

He swallowed, throat tight. “Did you… see that?”

“See what?”

He hesitated. The room felt smaller now, as though the distortion had leaned in with him. He glanced again at the corner — not directly, just enough to catch the edge of it.

The curve returned.

A quiet, deliberate bend.
A correction.
A presence.

His breath hitched.

Susan followed his gaze, turning slightly in her chair. “Are you looking at something specific?”

The curve straightened the instant she moved.

Carl stared at the now-ordinary corner, heart hammering. “It’s here,” he whispered.

Susan’s brow furrowed. “What is?”

He couldn’t answer. Not because he didn’t want to — but because the distortion felt aware of the conversation. The air hummed faintly, a low vibration that seemed to resonate through the legs of the chair, the carpet, the bones of his jaw.

Susan didn’t react to the hum.
She didn’t hear it.
She couldn’t.

“Carl,” she said gently, “I need you to tell me what you’re experiencing.”

He tore his eyes away from the corner and looked at her. She was steady, grounded, real. But the room behind her wasn’t. The distortion had followed him here. Into her office. Into the one place he’d hoped would be untouched.

“It’s not just happening at home,” he said, voice barely audible. “It’s happening here.”

Susan softened. “You’re safe here.”

Carl shook his head slowly.

“No,” he whispered. “I don’t think I am.”

He didn’t mean danger.
He meant attention.

The distortion pulsed once — a subtle shift in the shadow, a quiet acknowledgement — then stilled.

Susan didn’t see it.

Carl did.

And for the first time, he realised he was completely alone with it.

Carl let himself into the flat with the slow, deliberate movements of someone entering a room they no longer trust. The air felt still, but not empty. It had the same charged quietness as before, the sense of a space holding its shape with careful intention.

He didn’t turn on the lights.
He didn’t move far from the door.
He just stood there, listening.

Nothing shifted.
Nothing bent.
Nothing hummed.

But the silence felt aware.

Eventually he forced himself to move — coat off, shoes by the door, a glass of water he barely touched. He sat on the edge of the bed, exhausted in a way that felt deeper than tiredness. His thoughts were frayed, his nerves raw, his sense of reality stretched thin.

He lay down.

Sleep took him quickly, as though something had been waiting for him to close his eyes.

He was standing in the flat again.

Not the real flat.
The dream-flat.
The reconstructed one.

The walls were too smooth.

The corners too sharp.
The air too still.

He turned slowly, heart pounding, knowing what he would see before he saw it.

The corner.

The same corner that had bent in the walkway.
The same corner that had curved in Susan's office.
The same corner that had followed him home.

Here, in the dream, it wasn't a corner at all.

It was an opening.

A soft, deliberate fold in the geometry of the room — like a page being turned in a book he didn't remember writing. The curve pulsed once, a quiet, measured breath.

Carl stepped back.

The hum rose — low, resonant, familiar.
The same vibration that had followed him for days.
The same frequency that felt like it lived behind his eyes.

The curve brightened at its edges.

The air thickened.

And then, from somewhere that wasn't a direction — not above, not behind, not within the room — a voice formed.

Not spoken.
Not heard.
Just present.

A single word.

Soft.
Precise.
Unavoidable.

"I'm coming."

Carl's breath tore from his throat.

The room folded inward — not collapsing, not attacking, just adjusting, as though making space for something that had already begun to arrive.

He stumbled backward, but the floor moved with him, sliding under his feet like a surface recalibrating around a new centre.

The curve widened.

The hum deepened.

The voice — if it was a voice — pulsed again, closer this time, as though the geometry itself were speaking.

“I’m coming.”

Carl fell through the space where the corner should have been.

He woke with a violent jolt, sitting upright in bed, drenched in sweat, the darkness of the real room feeling too still, too perfect, too carefully arranged.

And for the first time, he wasn’t sure the dream had ended.

Carl sat on the edge of the chair, shoulders tight, hands clasped so hard his fingers ached. The room felt smaller today. Not physically — the dimensions were the same — but the air had a density to it, a faint pressure that made him feel as though he were sitting inside a sealed container.

Susan noticed immediately.

“You look like you haven’t slept,” she said gently.

Carl let out a thin breath. “I haven’t.”

“Nightmares again?”

He hesitated. The word nightmare felt too small, too childish, too human for what had happened. He nodded anyway.

Susan waited, pen poised but not moving. She always gave him space to speak. Today, the space felt unbearable.

“Carl,” she said softly, “you can tell me what happened.”

He opened his mouth.

Closed it.

The memory of the dream pressed against him — the curve widening, the hum deepening, the voice forming out of geometry itself. I'm coming. The words still vibrated in his bones, as though they'd been spoken from inside him rather than around him.

He couldn't say it.

Not because he didn't want to.
Because saying it felt like acknowledging something that was already too close.

Susan leaned forward slightly. "Carl… what did you experience?"

He stared at the carpet. The pattern blurred. His throat tightened.

"I heard something," he whispered.

Susan's expression softened. "In the dream?"

He nodded.

"What did it say?"

He swallowed hard. The room felt too quiet. Too still. The corners felt too sharp, as though the geometry were listening.

He shook his head. "I can't."

"Can't, or don't want to?"

Carl looked up at her. Her eyes were steady, warm, human. She was trying. She was doing everything right. But the words wouldn't come.

"It wasn't… language," he said finally. "Not really."

Susan tilted her head slightly. "But you understood it."

He nodded once.

"What did it mean?"

Carl's breath trembled. "That it's not finished."

Susan wrote something down — slowly, carefully, as though she didn't want the sound of the pen to startle him.

“Carl,” she said gently, “dreams often reflect our fears. They can feel incredibly real, especially when we’re under stress.”

“It wasn’t a dream,” he said, too quickly.

Susan paused. “What makes you so sure?”

He looked at the corner of the room — not directly, just enough to catch the edge of it.

Straight.
Still.
Ordinary.

But he felt it.
The faint hum behind his eyes.
The quiet pressure in the air.
The sense of being observed.

“It followed me here,” he whispered.

Susan’s brow creased. “The feeling?”

Carl shook his head slowly. “No. It.”

Susan’s voice softened even further. “Carl… what do you think is following you?”

He opened his mouth.

The words I’m coming rose in his throat like a pulse.

But he couldn’t say them.

Because saying them felt like inviting the entity into the room.

He shook his head again, voice barely audible. “I can’t tell you.”

Susan sat back, studying him with a mixture of concern and helplessness. “Then let’s start somewhere smaller. What do you feel right now?”

Carl’s eyes drifted again to the corner.

Still straight.
Still harmless.
Still pretending.

“Watched,” he said.

Susan nodded slowly. “By me?”

“No,” he whispered. “Not by you.”

And for the first time, Susan didn’t know what to say.

Carl left Susan’s office feeling hollow, as though the conversation had scraped something raw inside him. The corridor outside felt too bright, too clean, the angles too sharp. He walked quickly, head down, trying to outrun the sense of being observed.

By the time he reached the street, the air felt thin.

He didn’t go straight home.
He didn’t want to.
But his feet carried him there anyway, as though the route had been chosen for him.

When he unlocked the flat and stepped inside, the silence greeted him like a held breath.

He closed the door.

The air tightened.

Not dramatically.
Not enough to frighten him outright.
Just enough to tell him he wasn’t alone.

He stood in the hallway, coat still on, keys still in his hand, listening.

Nothing moved.
Nothing bent.
Nothing hummed.

But the space felt expectant.

He walked slowly into the living room.

Stopped.

The mug he’d left on the table that morning was no longer on the table.

It sat on the floor.

Not knocked over.
Not fallen.
Placed.

Perfectly centred on the rug.

Carl’s breath caught.

He crouched slowly, reaching toward it — not to touch it, just to see if the air around it felt different.

The moment his hand hovered above it, the room shifted.

A faint vibration ran through the floorboards, subtle enough that he might have doubted it if it hadn’t been so familiar. The same resonance from the dream. The same frequency that had carried the words I’m coming.

His fingers trembled.

The vibration deepened — not louder, not stronger, just closer, as though the entity were leaning toward him through the geometry of the room.

Then the mug moved.

Not much.
Not far.
Just a tiny, deliberate rotation — a quarter turn, smooth and precise, as though guided by an invisible hand.

Carl jerked back, heart hammering.

The vibration stopped instantly.

The room fell silent.

But the silence wasn’t empty.

It was a reply.

A quiet, unmistakable acknowledgement.

A waking-world echo of the dream’s message.

Not spoken.
Not heard.

Just present.

I’m here.

Carl staggered to his feet, breath shaking, eyes darting to the corners of the room. Everything looked normal. Perfectly normal. But the normality felt staged, as though the flat were holding its shape for his benefit.

He backed toward the hallway.

The air tightened again.

A soft, almost imperceptible hum flickered behind his eyes — the same frequency as the dream, the same tone that had carried the entity’s words.

Not I’m coming this time.

Something closer.

Something immediate.

A presence, not a promise.

Carl pressed his back against the wall, chest heaving.

The entity didn’t need to speak.

Its reply was already inside the room.

Sleep didn’t take Carl gently.

It pulled him under.

One moment he was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling he no longer trusted.
The next, he was standing in the dream-flat again — the reconstructed version, the one that felt like a memory rebuilt by something that had never lived in a human body.

The air was still.
The geometry was wrong.
The silence had weight.

He turned slowly.

The corner was already bending.

Not subtly this time.
Not shyly.
The curve was wider, deeper, more deliberate — as though the entity had grown confident in its shape.

Carl’s breath hitched.

The hum rose immediately, responding to him.
Not loud.
Not aggressive.
Just present.

A resonance that felt like it lived inside his bones.

The curve pulsed once.

Then again.

Then the room shifted — a soft, almost graceful adjustment of angles, like a living organism stretching after sleep.

Carl stepped back.

The hum followed.

It wasn’t a sound.
It wasn’t a voice.
It was a pattern — a modulation of pressure, a shaping of space, a rhythm that carried meaning the way breath carries speech.

The curve brightened at its edges.

The hum deepened.

And then the entity spoke.

Not in words.
Not in language.
But in a structure that became language inside Carl’s mind.

A layered vibration.
A folding of space.
A pulse of intention.

“You hear me.”

Carl staggered, the meaning hitting him like a physical force.
Not a question.
Not a statement.

A recognition.

The curve widened further, the geometry bending inward as though the room were leaning toward him.

The hum shifted again — a new pattern, sharper, more focused.

“You see me.”

Carl shook his head, backing away, but the floor moved with him, adjusting to keep him centred. The dream-flat was no longer a place. It was a container.

The curve pulsed a third time.

The hum tightened, becoming a narrow, precise frequency that vibrated behind his eyes.

The meaning formed slowly, deliberately, as though the entity were choosing its shape with care.

“You are learning.”

Carl’s breath tore from his throat.

The room folded — not collapsing, not attacking, just reconfiguring, as though making space for something larger, something closer, something that had been waiting for him to understand.

The hum deepened into a single, resonant note.

The curve brightened.

The meaning crystallised.

Not a threat.
Not a promise.
A declaration.

“I am near.”

Carl fell backward into the bending geometry, the dream collapsing around him like a sheet being pulled taut.

He woke with a violent gasp, sitting upright in bed, heart hammering, the darkness of the real room feeling too still, too symmetrical, too carefully arranged.

And for the first time, he realised the entity wasn't just approaching.

It was closing the distance.

Carl sat on the sofa with every light in the flat switched on. The brightness didn't comfort him — it only made the shadows sharper, the corners more defined, the geometry more suspicious. His body was exhausted, but his mind was wired, humming with the memory of the dream.

I am near.

He couldn't let himself fall asleep again.
He couldn't let it speak to him again.

He stood abruptly, pacing the living room. The floor felt slightly uneven beneath his feet — not visibly, not measurably, just in the way his balance kept adjusting, as though the flat were recalibrating around him.

He made coffee.
Then another.
Then another.

His hands shook.

He splashed cold water on his face.
He opened windows.
He walked laps around the flat.

Every time he slowed, every time his eyelids dipped, the hum flickered at the edge of his hearing — a soft, low resonance, like a reminder.

He sat down, rubbing his temples.

"Not tonight," he whispered. "Not again."

The air tightened.

A subtle shift.
A quiet acknowledgement.

He froze.

The hum deepened by a fraction — not loud, not intrusive, just responsive, as though the entity had heard him and was adjusting its behaviour.

Carl stood, heart pounding. “Stay away.”

The hum softened.

Not retreating.
Not obeying.
Just… changing.

As though it were trying to reassure him.

He backed toward the hallway, breath shaking. “I’m not sleeping.”

The lights flickered.

Just once.
A brief, delicate pulse.

Carl stared at the ceiling, dread crawling up his spine.

The flicker wasn’t electrical.
It wasn’t random.
It was timed.

A reply.

He grabbed his coat, deciding he’d walk all night if he had to. Anything to stay awake. Anything to stay out of the flat.

He reached for the door handle.

The hum sharpened.

Not loud.
Not angry.
Just precise — a narrow frequency that vibrated behind his eyes, the same tone the entity had used in the dream.

A shape formed at the edge of his vision.

Not a curve this time.
Not a bend.

A tilt.

The slightest, most delicate shift in the angle of the hallway — a geometric nudge, as though the space were leaning toward him.

Carl's breath caught.

The entity wasn't trying to stop him.

It was trying to guide him.

The hum pulsed again, softer now, almost coaxing.

A meaning formed — not a word, not a sentence, but an intention.

Don't run.

Carl stumbled back from the door, shaking.

He wasn't imagining it.
He wasn't misinterpreting it.
The entity was responding to his fear.

And worse —
it was adapting.

He backed into the living room, chest tight, eyes burning with exhaustion.

The hum softened further, becoming almost gentle.

A second intention formed, clearer this time, shaped by the same strange, geometric logic as the dream.

Sleep.

Carl pressed his hands to his ears, but the meaning wasn't sound. It was inside him, vibrating through the architecture of his thoughts.

He shook his head violently. "No. No, I'm not—"

The lights dimmed.

Not flickered.
Not failed.
Dimmed.

A slow, deliberate lowering of brightness, as though the flat were preparing itself for rest.

Carl’s knees buckled.

The hum deepened.

The meaning sharpened.

Sleep.

He fought it — he really did — but the exhaustion was too deep, the pressure too precise, the entity too close.

His vision blurred.
His body sagged.
The room tilted gently, like a cradle.

He collapsed onto the sofa.

The last thing he felt before consciousness slipped was the air tightening around him — not threatening, not hostile.

Just claiming him.

Carl dropped into sleep like a stone through water.

No drifting.
No transition.
Just a sudden, absolute plunge.

He opened his eyes — or thought he did — and the dream-flat was already there, fully formed, waiting. The walls were too smooth, the corners too sharp, the air too still. The space felt curated, as though the entity had prepared it in advance.

He wasn’t standing this time.

He was placed.

In the centre of the room.
Exactly centred.
As though positioned with geometric precision.

The hum began immediately.

Not tentative.
Not exploratory.
Confident.

A low, resonant frequency that vibrated through the floor, up his legs, into his chest. The room brightened at the edges, not with light, but with definition, as though the geometry were sharpening itself around him.

The corner began to bend.

Not slowly.
Not subtly.

It folded inward with the smooth inevitability of a muscle contracting.

Carl's breath hitched.

The hum shifted — a modulation, a tightening of frequency — and meaning formed inside him with startling clarity.

"You resist."

Carl staggered back, but the floor moved with him, keeping him centred. The room was no longer a space. It was a mechanism.

The curve widened.

The hum deepened.

A second meaning pulsed through him, sharper this time.

"You fear."

Carl shook his head, but the denial felt childish, irrelevant. The entity wasn't asking. It was observing.

The walls stretched slightly, as though inhaling.

The hum narrowed into a precise, needle-thin vibration that resonated behind his eyes.

"You learn."

Carl’s knees buckled.

The room adjusted instantly, supporting him, holding him upright without touch. The geometry behaved like a hand placed gently at his back.

The curve brightened.

The hum softened.

A new meaning formed — slower, more deliberate, as though the entity were choosing its shape with care.

“I am closer.”

Carl’s pulse hammered.

The room folded again — not collapsing, not attacking, just reconfiguring, as though making space for something that had already begun to arrive.

The hum rose, layered now, harmonics forming patterns that felt like thoughts brushing against his own.

The next meaning came with a weight that felt almost physical.

“You cannot stay awake.”

Carl’s breath tore from his throat.

The curve widened further, opening into a shape he couldn’t comprehend — a geometry that felt like a doorway, a mouth, a threshold.

The hum tightened.

The final meaning struck with the clarity of a spoken word.

“I am here.”

The room snapped inward — a soft, inevitable collapse — and Carl fell through the bending space.

He woke with a violent jolt, heart pounding, the real flat around him feeling wrong in a way he couldn’t name.

Because the dream hadn’t ended.

It had simply moved.

Susan was writing her session notes when she paused, pen hovering above the page. Something about Carl's behaviour today unsettled her in a way she couldn't quite articulate. She'd seen anxiety. She'd seen sleep deprivation. She'd seen dissociation. But this was different.

He was deteriorating.

And faster than she'd anticipated.

She flipped back through her notes from previous weeks. The progression was stark. His language had shifted — from uncertainty to conviction, from confusion to fear, from fear to something she didn't have a clinical term for.

She replayed the session in her mind.

The way he'd sat — rigid, as though bracing against something she couldn't see.
The way his eyes kept drifting to the corners of the room.
The way he'd flinched when she moved her chair.
The way he'd spoken in fragments, as though choosing each word was a negotiation.

And the exhaustion.

Not the usual kind.
Not the kind that came from lack of sleep.
Something deeper.
Something that looked like he was being worn down from the inside.

She closed her notebook and leaned back in her chair, exhaling slowly.

Carl was slipping.

She'd seen patients decline before, but not like this — not with this suddenness, not with this intensity, not with this strange, inward-pulling quality. It was as though something had accelerated between sessions, something she hadn't been able to intercept.

She thought about the moment he'd gone still.

The moment his eyes had fixed on the corner behind her.

The moment the room had seemed to tighten around him — not literally, not physically, but in the way his posture had changed, the way his breath had caught, the way his pupils had dilated.

She hadn’t seen anything there.

But he had.

She rubbed her temples, trying to shake the unease. She didn’t believe in shared hallucinations. She didn’t believe in external entities. She believed in stress responses, sleep deprivation, trauma, neurological misfires.

But Carl’s decline didn’t fit neatly into any of those boxes.

She opened her notebook again and wrote a single line:

“Deterioration accelerating — unclear cause.”

She hesitated.

Then added:

“Feels observed.”

She stared at the words.

Not he feels observed.
Feels observed.

As though the room itself had been holding its breath.

Susan closed the notebook slowly.

She didn’t know what was happening to Carl.

But she knew one thing with absolute certainty:

Whatever it was, it was moving faster than she could reach him.

Carl woke from the dream with a violent jolt, lungs burning, heart hammering against his ribs. The room around him felt wrong — not visibly, not measurably, but in the way the air pressed against his skin, as though the flat were holding its shape with effort.

I am here.

The words still vibrated inside him, not as sound, but as memory.

He sat up slowly, gripping the edge of the sofa. His hands shook. His vision swam. Every instinct screamed at him to lie back down, to close his eyes, to let the dream pull him under again.

He refused.

“No,” he whispered, voice raw. “Not again.”

The air tightened.

A subtle shift.
A quiet acknowledgement.

Carl stood, legs unsteady, and forced himself toward the kitchen. Every step felt like wading through invisible resistance, as though the flat were gently pushing back.

He grabbed the counter for support.

“I’m not doing this,” he said, louder this time. “You don’t get to decide when I sleep.”

The hum flickered at the edge of his hearing — soft, low, almost curious.

Carl clenched his jaw. “Stop.”

The hum sharpened.

Not threatening.
Not angry.
Just precise — a narrow frequency that vibrated behind his eyes, the same tone the entity used when it wanted him to understand.

Carl pressed his palms to his temples. “Stop. Stop. Stop.”

The lights dimmed.

Not flickered.
Not failed.
Dimmed.

A slow, deliberate lowering of brightness, as though the flat were responding to his distress with a kind of geometric empathy.

Carl’s breath hitched. “No. You don’t get to comfort me.”

The hum softened.

A modulation.
A recalibration.
A reply.

“You resist.”

The meaning formed inside him with the same clarity as the dream, but this time he was awake. The entity wasn’t speaking through sleep. It was speaking through the architecture of the room.

Carl staggered back, shaking. “I don’t want you here.”

The air tightened further.

A second meaning pulsed through him — slower, heavier, as though the entity were choosing its shape with care.

“You fear.”

Carl slammed his fist against the wall.

The wall didn’t bend.
The wall didn’t ripple.
The wall didn’t react.

But the air did.

A subtle shift.
A quiet intake.
A geometric flinch.

Carl froze.

The entity wasn’t afraid.
It wasn’t threatened.
It wasn’t hurt.

It was surprised.

The hum narrowed into a thin, trembling frequency — not sharp, not aggressive, but attentive.

A third meaning formed, clearer than the others.

“You fight.”

Carl backed away, breath shaking. “Yes. I fight. I don’t want you. I don’t want this.”

The room held still.

Perfectly still.

Then the corner — the same corner that had bent in the walkway, in Susan’s office, in every dream — dipped.

A soft, shallow curve.

Not wide.
Not deep.
Just enough to show it had heard him.

The hum deepened.

A final meaning crystallised, heavy and inevitable.

“You cannot win.”

Carl’s knees buckled.

The lights dimmed further.

The air pressed in.

And for the first time, he understood:

The entity wasn’t punishing him.
It wasn’t angry.
It wasn’t even asserting dominance.

It was stating a fact.

A geometric truth.

Something woven into the structure of the world.

Carl slid down the wall, trembling, the room closing around him with quiet, patient certainty.

He had fought back.

And the entity had simply…
adjusted.

Carl sat on the floor of the living room, back against the wall, legs pulled tight to his chest. The flat was too quiet. Not peaceful — expectant. The air felt thick, as though the room were holding its shape with careful, deliberate tension.

He was shaking.

Not from fear.
Not entirely.
From exhaustion.
From the weight of the dreams.
From the sense that something was closing in with patient inevitability.

The hum flickered at the edge of his hearing.

Soft.
Low.
Familiar.

Carl lifted his head.

“Stop,” he whispered.

The hum softened.

Not retreating.
Not obeying.
Just listening.

Carl swallowed hard. His throat felt raw. His chest felt tight. He pressed his palms against the floor, grounding himself in the cool solidity of the boards.

“What do you want from me?” he said.

The words came out thin, cracked, barely more than breath — but they carried weight. They were the first direct question he had ever asked it. The first time he had tried to understand rather than flee.

The air tightened.

A subtle shift.
A quiet intake.

A geometric attention.

The hum deepened — not louder, not closer, just more focused, as though the entity were narrowing itself into a single, precise intention.

The corner dipped.

A soft, shallow curve.

Carl’s breath caught.

The curve widened by a fraction — a gesture, a response, a turning of its attention toward him.

The hum modulated.

A pattern formed.

Not a word.
Not a sentence.
A meaning.

“You ask.”

Carl’s pulse hammered. “Yes. I’m asking. What do you want?”

The room held still.

Then the geometry shifted — a gentle, almost graceful adjustment of angles, like a living organism stretching toward him.

The hum tightened into a narrow, resonant frequency that vibrated behind his eyes.

A second meaning formed.

“You see.”

Carl shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

The curve brightened at its edges.

The hum deepened.

A third meaning pulsed through him — heavier, clearer, shaped with deliberate care.

“You open.”

Carl’s breath trembled. “Open what?”

The room folded slightly — not collapsing, not threatening, just reconfiguring, as though demonstrating something he couldn’t yet grasp.

The hum layered, harmonics forming a structure that felt like thought brushing against his own.

The next meaning struck with quiet inevitability.

“You.”

Carl’s stomach dropped.

He pressed back against the wall, shaking. “No. No, I’m not— I’m not opening anything.”

The air tightened further.

Not in anger.
Not in force.
In recognition.

The curve widened.

The hum softened into something almost gentle.

A final meaning crystallised — slow, patient, inevitable.

“You already have.”

Carl’s breath tore from his throat.

The lights dimmed.
The air pressed in.
The geometry leaned toward him with quiet certainty.

And for the first time, Carl understood:

The entity didn’t want something from him.

It wanted something through him.

Carl sat in the chair opposite Susan, shoulders hunched, eyes hollow. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days — not properly, not safely. His hands trembled in his lap, fingers twitching with a restless, involuntary rhythm.

Susan noticed immediately.

"Carl," she said softly, "you look exhausted."

He swallowed hard. "I need to tell you something."

Her posture shifted — attentive, grounded, ready to receive whatever he brought into the room. "Go on."

Carl opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

The words were there — I'm not alone, it's here, it's speaking to me, it wants something through me — but they felt impossible to form. Not because he didn't want to say them, but because the entity's presence pressed against the inside of his skull like a hand over his mouth.

He tried again.

"I think…" His voice cracked. "I think something's happening to me."

Susan nodded gently. "You've been under a lot of strain. Sleep deprivation can—"

"No." He shook his head violently. "It's not sleep. It's not stress. It's—"

He stopped.

The corner of the room dipped.

Just a fraction.
Just enough for him to see.
Just enough to remind him.

Susan didn't notice.

Carl's breath hitched. His eyes darted to the floor. "It's here."

Susan leaned forward. "What's here?"

He couldn't say it.

The hum flickered behind his eyes — soft, low, a warning. Not aggressive. Not punitive. Just a reminder of proximity.

Carl pressed a hand to his forehead. “I can’t… I can’t explain it.”

“Try,” Susan said gently. “Whatever you’re experiencing, we can work through it.”

He laughed — a thin, broken sound. “No. You can’t.”

Susan’s expression softened with concern. “Carl, I’m here to help you. But I need you to tell me what you’re feeling.”

He looked up at her, eyes shining with a kind of quiet desperation.

“I’m not safe,” he whispered.

Susan’s breath caught. “Are you thinking of harming yourself?”

“No!” He shook his head, panicked. “No, it’s not me. It’s—”

The hum tightened.

A narrow, precise frequency that vibrated behind his eyes.

A meaning formed.

Stop.

Carl flinched.

Susan saw the movement, misinterpreting it as fear of his own thoughts. “Carl, if you’re feeling overwhelmed, we can slow down. You don’t have to force anything.”

He stared at her.

She was trying.
She was reaching.
She was human.

And he was no longer entirely in a human space.

“I’m trying to warn you,” he said, voice trembling. “But I don’t think I can.”

Susan’s brow furrowed. “Warn me about what?”

Carl looked at the corner.

The curve straightened instantly.

The hum softened.

The entity was listening.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. “It doesn’t want me to tell you.”

Susan froze.

Not because she believed him — but because the fear in his voice was too real, too raw, too unlike anything she’d heard from him before.

“Carl,” she said carefully, “who is ‘it’?”

He closed his eyes.

He couldn’t say it.
He couldn’t shape the meaning.
The entity was too close.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I can’t.”

Susan sat back slowly, her concern deepening into something heavier — something that felt like dread, though she would never name it that.

Carl looked at her with hollow eyes.

“I tried,” he said.

And Susan realised — with a quiet, sinking certainty — that whatever was happening to him was moving faster than she could reach.

Carl sat on the floor of his flat, back against the cold wall, breath shallow. The room felt too still, too symmetrical, as though the geometry were holding its breath. He could feel the entity’s presence pressing softly against the edges of his awareness — not inside the room, but through it.

He closed his eyes.

“What do you want me to do?” he whispered.

The air tightened.

A faint hum rose — low, resonant, familiar. The corner dipped, a soft, deliberate curve. The room adjusted around him with the quiet precision of a mechanism coming online.

The hum shifted.

A meaning formed.

“Open.”

Carl shook his head. “Open what? I don’t understand.”

The geometry responded.

The walls stretched by a fraction — not visibly, but in the way the air moved, the way the floor seemed to tilt beneath him. The curve widened, brightening at its edges.

A second meaning pulsed through him.

“Path.”

Carl’s stomach dropped. “I can’t open anything. I don’t know how.”

The hum deepened.

Not impatient.
Not angry.
Just certain.

“You do.”

Carl pressed his hands to his temples. “No. I don’t. I don’t know what you mean.”

The room folded slightly — a gentle, almost compassionate adjustment, as though the entity were trying to show him something without overwhelming him.

A third meaning formed, heavier, clearer.

“You are the path.”

Carl’s breath tore from his throat.

He wasn’t supposed to open something.
He was the opening.

The entity wasn’t trying to enter the world.
It was trying to enter through him.

He staggered to his feet, shaking. “No. No, I’m not doing that. I’m not letting you use me.”

The hum narrowed into a thin, trembling frequency — not threatening, but inevitable.

The curve brightened.

A new meaning crystallised.

“You already have.”

Carl backed away, heart pounding. “I won’t help you.”

The air tightened sharply.

The lights dimmed.

The geometry leaned toward him with quiet, crushing certainty.

A final meaning formed — slow, patient, absolute.

“If you do not open, you break.”

Carl froze.

The room held still.

The hum softened, almost gentle now, as though offering him a choice that wasn’t a choice at all.

“If you open, you change.”

He swallowed hard. “And if I refuse?”

The curve widened.

The hum deepened.

The answer came with the weight of a physical force.

“Then you end.”

Carl’s knees buckled.

The entity wasn’t threatening him.
It wasn’t punishing him.
It wasn’t even angry.

It was stating a structural truth.

A geometric consequence.

He was the path.
He was the hinge.
He was the opening.

And if he refused to open, the structure would collapse.

Him first.

The flat was silent.

Not the silence of emptiness, but the silence of a system waiting for a final input. The geometry had tightened into a posture of perfect readiness — corners poised, shadows curved, the air trembling with a soft, resonant hum.

Carl stood in the centre of the room.

He was exhausted.
Hollowed out.
Barely holding himself upright.

But he understood now.

“What happens if I don’t open?” he whispered.

The hum deepened.

A meaning formed — heavy, absolute.

“The world unravels.”

Carl’s breath caught. “Unravels how?”

The room shifted — a subtle, sorrowful adjustment.

“Entropy accelerates. Collapse begins. Life ends.”

Carl closed his eyes.

He had assumed the entity was a threat.
He had assumed it wanted to enter the world.
He had assumed he was a doorway for invasion.

But the truth settled into him with cold, geometric clarity:

The entity was not here to destroy.
It was here to correct.

To restore balance.
To stabilise a failing system.
To bring order to a universe drifting toward chaos.

He swallowed hard. “And if I open?”

The hum softened.

Not comforting.
Not gentle.
Just honest.

“The world holds.”

Carl’s voice trembled. “And me?”

The curve widened — a gesture of acknowledgement, not cruelty.

“You end.”

Carl nodded slowly.

He thought of Susan.
He thought of the people outside, unaware of the cosmic imbalance creeping toward them.
He thought of the dreams, the distortions, the pressure behind his eyes.

He thought of the entity’s patience.

It had never threatened the world.
Only him.

He exhaled.

“Show me what I have to do.”

The room responded instantly.

The walls stretched.
The corners dipped.
The air thickened into a soft, resonant pressure.

The hum rose — layered, harmonic, a structure of meaning that felt like a hand reaching toward him.

Carl stepped forward.

The geometry folded around him — not trapping, not consuming, but aligning, as though the room were adjusting itself to his shape.

The hum tightened.

A final meaning formed — slow, solemn, absolute.

“You are the stabiliser.”

Carl’s breath shook. “I’m not strong enough.”

The curve brightened.

“You are sufficient.”

He closed his eyes.

And he opened.

Not physically.
Not visibly.

But structurally — a widening of the boundary inside him, a surrender of the narrow human architecture he had always assumed was fixed.

The entity moved through him.

Not into the world.
Not into the flat.

Into the failing fabric of reality itself.

Carl felt his body dissolve — not painfully, not violently, but with the quiet inevitability of a structure returning to equilibrium.

His thoughts stretched.
His senses dimmed.
His self thinned into something transparent.

The hum deepened into a single, perfect note.

The world steadied.

The geometry relaxed.

And Carl was gone.

Not destroyed.
Not consumed.

Used.

A necessary sacrifice in the restoration of cosmic order.

The flat fell silent.

The entity had completed its work.

The world was safe.

And Carl —
Carl was the hinge that held it together,
for one final, perfect moment.

EPILOGUE — FIVE YEARS LATER

Susan still worked in the same counselling room, the same soft lighting, the same careful arrangement of chairs. Five years had passed, but the routine hadn't changed. Routine helped. Routine kept the world steady.

Her next client was new.

A gentle knock.

"Come in," Susan said.

A girl stepped inside — twelve, maybe thirteen — dark hair, pale eyes, shoulders drawn in as though she were bracing against something she couldn't name.

"Hello, Amelia," Susan said warmly. "Please, take a seat."

The girl hesitated. "I… prefer Amy."

Susan nodded. "Of course. Amy."

Amy sat, hands clasped tightly in her lap. Her gaze drifted around the room — not nervously, but with a quiet, deliberate attention, as though she were checking the angles of the walls, the shape of the shadows.

A faint, unwelcome memory stirred in Susan's chest.

"What brings you here today?" she asked gently.

Amy swallowed. "It's… something that happens at night."

Susan leaned forward slightly. "Tell me about it."

Amy's voice dropped. "Sometimes, when I'm trying to sleep… I see shadows that twist out of shape."

Susan's breath caught — a tiny, involuntary pause — before she forced her expression to remain steady.

Amy continued, unaware. "They don't come close. They just… bend. Like they're not supposed to be the shape they are."

A familiar pressure gathered behind Susan's eyes — a sensation she hadn't felt in years.

"How long has this been happening?" she asked, keeping her voice even.

“A few months,” Amy said. “I thought it was dreams. But I’m awake when it happens.”

Susan nodded slowly. “And how does it make you feel?”

Amy hesitated. “Like they’re waiting for something.”

The room felt smaller.

Susan’s gaze flicked — just once — to the corner behind Amy. Perfectly straight. Perfectly ordinary. Yet she found herself watching it a moment too long.

“You’re safe here,” she said softly. “We’ll work through this together.”

Amy relaxed a little.

Susan didn’t.

As the girl spoke, Susan felt the air shift — a subtle tightening, a quiet pressure, the faint echo of a pattern she had spent years trying to forget.

Her eyes drifted back to the corner.

Still straight.
Still harmless.
Still pretending.

A thought rose, unbidden and cold.

What if Carl hadn’t been wrong?
What if she had never truly understood what he saw?
What if this wasn’t a memory resurfacing…
but something beginning again?

Amy kept talking.

Susan kept listening.

But her attention kept slipping back to that corner — the one that hadn’t moved.

Not visibly.

Not yet.

And she realised she could no longer tell whether she was hearing a frightened child…

…or the first quiet shift in a pattern she had prayed would never return.